

The Arab Spring – A Brief View of Morocco's February 20 Movement and Effects

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Abstract: Since 2011, Morocco has been engaged in a series of political, constitutional and institutional reforms, including a wider respect for human rights. The debates and changes can be attributed to the unprecedented organised mass protests in Morocco, which became known as the February 20 Movement. Importantly, to note, was the fact that the protestors did not challenge the monarchy, what was challenged was the democratization of not only Morocco but solidarity with protestors in other countries that experienced corruption, social injustice and a serious lack and respect for the most basic and fundamental human rights in a broader constitutional context.

I. INTRODUCTION

The wave of the Arab Spring that originated in Tunisia and Egypt arrived at Morocco in 2011, creating a pathway of unprecedented organized mass-protest all over the country. Encouraged by the uprising in the MENA (Middle East and North African) region, young Moroccans organized themselves demanding substantive democratic change, social justice and anti-corruption mechanism to be put in place. The February 20 movement named after the first demonstration held on that date, is a good example of one of the new social movements characterised by intense use of technology and their vast membership across the country. This article provides a brief overview how protestors challenged the dominant institutions and norms in Morocco through their collective struggle and how they created new meanings for those institutions, not only by protesting but also using the various social media platforms available to them, such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter.

The February 20 movement originated in the midst of the popular uprisings that spread across Middle Eastern North African (MENA region) and Libya during the Arab Spring calling for the removal of their respective authoritarian, corrupt and dependent political governments.¹ There is sufficient evidence that the February 20 movement is the Moroccan extension of the Arab spring.² The February 20 movement gained momentum especially by the youth of Morocco calling for change and addressing short videos on various social media platforms such Facebook and YouTube videos to the Monarchy.³ It is an important point to mention that February 20 movement, members were mostly unknown. They were mostly born in the 1980-1990's and, are considered to be among the 60 percent of the Moroccan population who were at the time under forty years of age.⁴ Of interest, was the fact that Islamists movements were not the motivators of the protests, this is of importance as Morocco is always characterised by so called Orientalists assumptions.⁵ Due to use of the various social platforms used by the youth to democratize Moroccan society, these protests acquired a new name in the Middle East as the "Twitter revolution".⁶

¹ Al-Akhssassi M "Reforms in Morocco: Monitoring the orbit and reading the trajectory" *Contemporary Arab Affairs* (2017) Vol. 10, No. 4 482-509.

² Lawrence AK "Repression and Activism among the Arab Spring's First Movers: Evidence from Morocco's February 20th Movement" *British Journal of Political Science* (2016) 699-718.

³ Radi A "Protest Movements and Social Media: Morocco's February 20 Movement" *African Development* Volume XLII, No. 2 (2017) 31-55.

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⁵ Desrues T "Mobilizations in a hybrid regime: The 20th February Movement and the Moroccan regime" *Current Sociology* 61(4) (2013) 409-423.

⁶ Brouwer L, Bartels E "Arab Spring in Morocco: social media and the 20 February movement" *AFRIKA FOCUS* Vol. 27, Nr. 2 (2014) 9-22.

The February 20, movement slogans and calls was for the establishing of a democratic Morocco through weekly demonstrations, calling for significant reforms of the monarchy.⁷ In getting their message across to all, the protestors made use of all available social and media platforms pressing for political reforms and urging the people to demonstrate together in the streets to demand change in the form of political and social reform.⁸ Thousands of young Moroccans joined the protest movements that demonstrated in various Moroccan cities and regions on 20 February 2011, raising slogans such as 'freedom and democracy now', 'the people want change' and 'for the sake of dignity'. Although the 20 February movement was not formally allied to mainstream politics, although they were later supported by one of the oldest Moroccan Human Rights Organisation (AMDH).⁹ At a later stage during the protests, people of the Berber movement, from different political parties, Marxists groups as well as labour unions joined the movement, or at least participated in the demonstrations.¹⁰ Islamism¹¹ in Morocco incorporates a large range of trends that differ extensively in their ideological tenets as well as the extent of their aspirations and perhaps also geographically.¹² The Islamists of the Party of Justice and Development (PJD) did not support or participate in the February 20 movement, however, the biggest Islamist group Justice and Spirituality Group (JSG – *Al-Adl wal ihsan*) – an Islamist opposition group to the monarchy joined at a later stage.¹³ Although, the monarchy maintained a conservative approach to the February 20 movement, surprisingly, Prince Moulay Hicham El Alaoui, a close relative of King Mohammed VI, pronounced support in an interview with France 24.¹⁴ The protestors demands were numerous. In a press conference on 17 February 2011, Tahani Madman, a nineteen year old student and active member of the movement announced some of the movements initial claims at the headquarters of the Moroccan Human Rights Association (AMDH) in Rabat.¹⁵ These claims became more detailed in a national press release on March 13.¹⁶ In an official statement of the February 20 movement, on its Facebook page posting its founding declaration – a mixture of macro-political demands and socio-political measures.¹⁷ The macro-political demands included a democratic constitution to reflect 'the true will of the people' and install a parliamentary monarchy, the dissolution of the government and parliament, the formation of an interim transitional government subject to the people's will and an independent, honest judiciary.¹⁸ The socio-political measures focused on demanding: the release of all

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¹¹ Bassam T "Islamism and Islam" (2012) Yale University Press 1-288. Islamism remains a contentious issue between those who advocate the political character of Islam and those who rebuff the possibility of turning the Islamic creed into a political map designed to govern Muslim societies. A comprehensive discussion relating to Islamism is beyond the scope of this paper.

¹² Flah L "The Discourse of Jama'at Al Adl Wal Ihsan (Justice and Spirituality Group) on the Concept of Democracy" *International Journal of Linguistics*, Dubai, UAE (2016) 1-15.

¹³ Brouwer L, Bartels E "Arab Spring in Morocco: social media and the 20 February movement" *AFRIKA FOCUS* Vol. 27, Nr. 2 (2014) 9-22. The choice of name "*Al Adl wal Ihsan*" (Justice and Spirituality Group) mirrors admirably the vision of JSG's founder Sheikh Abdesalam Yassine. *Al Adl* (justice) refers to a just reform of government that is expected to achieve equity in all realms of life whereas *Ihsane* (spirituality) refers to an advanced stage in the journey, the *Sufi* disciple marked by a profound knowledge of God. The use of *Sufi* terminology helps to preserve Yassine's supremacy as spiritual leader notably with the growing of democratization of the JSG.

¹⁴ The Interview "Prince Moulay El Alaoui of Morocco, cousin of King Mohammed VI" available at www.france24.com [accessed on 3 September 2020].

¹⁵ Global Nonviolent Action Database "Moroccan youth protest for constitutional reform, 2011" available at <http://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu> [accessed on 3 September 2020].

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political prisoners and prisoners of opinion; the trial of those responsible for arrests, torture and disappearances; fighting against corruption and the trial of those involved in corruption cases; the recognition of *Amazigh* (Berber) as an official language in addition to Arabic; the immediate and comprehensive integration of the unemployed into the civil service; the ability of all citizens to access social services and the improvement of its cost-effectiveness; the nationalization of public services; increased wages; an end to the high cost of living; and the guarantee of dignified lives for the people.¹⁹

Inasmuch as the effectiveness of the February 20 movement was distinguished by its popular and youthful momentum during the early stage of the uprisings, the size of its membership differed from one region and one city to another. This happened to the extent that for a few weeks the movement experienced a noticeable decline in its level of mobilization and the size of its membership. However, that may have been attributable to the structural limitations in the formation of the February 20 movement itself as well as political factors linked to initiatives by the state.²⁰ For example, one of the key activists linked to the February 20 movement in Rabat explained that there were groups trying to obstruct the protest: "authorities paid poor people to provoke the protestors into a demonstration".²¹ It is also reported from May 2011 onwards, the police resorted to using violent tactics as well as hiring "counter-demonstrators" in an effort to provoke peaceful demonstrations into violent demonstrations.²²

According to al-Akhssassi, there were structural limitations marked from the outset by three organizational features that had the greatest effect on its socio-political network.²³ First, it was a movement of radical origins. Hence, its formation depended on radical intellectual and political currents which drew from the culture of the 'revolutionary' Moroccan radical left. The movement attempted to absorb new generations of the youth and women into this way of intellectual and political radicalism. However, it was this political delineation that contributed to creating an intellectual, political and behavioural gap between the 20 February movement and the bloc of nationalist political forces who possessed political experience and deep roots in society. This delineation in turn was applied to the actual 'break' that distinguished the 20 February movement's attitude and approach to the struggle from that of nationalist political society which was marked by traditionalism and defeatism. This is perhaps what inspired the self-criticism of the movement by some of its activists. In answering the first question, posed by al-Akhssassi, the February 20 movement was driven by young people and political inexperience that has been attributed to them caused high expectations for the regeneration of Moroccan society – in terms of political and social participation within it – to be attached to the initial demonstrations.²⁴

Al-Akhssassi next point is that the 20 February movement was distinguished as being simultaneously a formative and a pioneering movement. Its membership included two radical political components that were opposed in their intellectual and political aims, namely the radical Marxists, represented by the radical left current, and the radical Islamists, represented by the JSA.²⁵ Although, this is correct, one must bear in mind that they only joined the movement at a later stage. The result is that it created a hybrid 'radical' formation had a negative effect on the level of popular membership in the movement, according to the assessment of its activists.²⁶ However, in a country such as Morocco, where Islam is the dominant faith, there is bound to be heated debates, and perhaps losing sight of how and what the February 20 movement was about and why it started with the youth and not any political alignment. Further discrepancies found in Moroccan society are

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²² Human Rights Watch "Morocco: Police Violence a Test for Revised Constitution" available at www.hrw.org [accessed on 3 September 2020].

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between those who support, albeit reluctantly, reforms backed by the monarchy and those who advocate a process of change that refutes the influence of the monarchy.²⁷ Moreover, the tactics adopted by the JSA for membership into the movement provoked doubts and anxieties in the ranks of the leftist groups.²⁸ According to Fathallah Arslane, a spokesman for the JSA, allegations that the group was preparing to seize power through an armed uprising and replace the monarchy with a radical Islamic fundamentalist government stem from fabricated reports in the local pro-state media. In response to increasing pressure by the authorities and press reports linking the group to radicalism, the JSA organized what they describe as an extensive "Open Doors" campaign in an effort to reach out to Moroccans in order to refute allegations by the group's critics linking them to radicalism and terrorism. Arslane believes that the popularity of the "Open Doors" program worried the authorities, especially ahead of next year's parliamentary elections, prompting them to clamp down.²⁹

Al-Akhssassi last point, the movement was distinguished by its ambiguous orientation.³⁰ On the one hand, the movement fell into the centre of a 'dual attraction' between the general and the particular framework. The former was the Arab Spring, the events of which had shaken the pillars of autocracy and the pockets of corruption in the Mena region and perhaps elsewhere in the Arab world. The latter was represented by the youth protest and demand movements, which were governed by the conditions of the national situation.³¹ This dual attraction affected the two different contexts of the movement with regard to the trajectory of their struggle and their political development. This is indeed the dimensions the February 20 movement ended up with. However, one must note, that this not a unique situation. Almost all protest globally will have some resemble to the above.

II. CONCLUSION

Historically, Morocco experienced large-scale political repression during the 1970s through the early 1990s. Through its actions, the regime repressed any claims aimed at challenging its authoritarian sphere of the public domain. The emergence of the February 20 movement had the effect of highlighting those issues for debate and reform. Prompted by the emergence and fortitude of the February 20 movement, the King of Morocco delivered a speech in March 2011 addressing reforms and modernization, resulting in expediting the drafting and adoption of a new Moroccan constitution in June 2011. This approach to change can be viewed as bottom-up approach compared to the top-down approach, which was adopted in Tunisia and Morocco in the past. Although, the February 20 movement had attracted the monarchy as well as the international audiences, they must be congratulated. However, there are some serious concerns which must be addressed, for example a more independent judiciary and the spreading of information to the rural outskirts of Morocco.

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²⁹ Zambelis C "Morocco Cracks Down on Islamist Opposition Group JSA" *Publication: Terrorism Focus* Volume:3 Issue 22 1-5 available at <http://jametowm.org>. [accessed on 3 September 2020].

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